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Nasty Gap and Lovely Suspense: Thinkable and Hearable Music in the Middle Ages

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Granted: If you ask for the very nature of music, you won't focus on medieval music in the first place. If you talk about music, the 'dark age' usually serves as a sort of nursery of music, which, in the proper sense, takes its historical place nevertheless just since the Renaissance. This narcissistic narrative of progression towards the modern era has not only despectively named the Middle Ages as such but also has its offshoot in this era itself: If you want to inform yourself about pre-modern music heuristically, you will, first and last, find the narrative of the invention of polyphony (the sacred cow of modern western music) within the (despectively named) '*ars antiqua*' and its overcoming through the (self-designated) '*ars nova*' in the 14th century (late enough), transferring music to the Renaissance. Accordingly, one can sum up the approximately 1000 years of medieval music with the three names Leonin, Perotin and Guillaume de Machaut. In this perspectivisation, the modern age certainly runs the risk of just admiring itself in the looking glass.

I am a medievalist and a practising musician, specialised in the interpretation of medieval courtly love songs and epics. My musical objects are monodic songs and non-artistic polyphony in the form of its accompaniment.¹ In the following, I want

to apply the paradigm “thinking music” to this realm of medieval music, straight in order to get insights in today’s music, its interpretation and reception. Because, as is often the case, the debate of medieval phenomena gives the opportunity to expose our self-evidences from a modern point of view as just seemingly facts.

In modern times, music self-evidently is audible. Thinking music, on the contrary, is questionable, like the essays in this issue prove. Audible music is music for sure (it can be good or bad music after all, but this is a matter of taste, not a question of the nature of music), but one can ask legitimately if thought music is already music or only its preform. In the Middle Ages, music exists kind of the other way round: Music is self-evidently thinkable, but one can ask legitimately if audible music is still music or only its imperfect, sometimes perverted permutation.

This surely is in need of explanation: Music in the Middle Ages is, first of all, a matter of philosophical speculation. As a discipline of the *quadrivium*, the *ars musica* addresses the relation of number and matter. In our modern systematisation, medieval music would be placed just between Maths and Physics.² The central term of both thinking and practising music in the Middle Ages is proportion: The rate of two physical bodies is measurable and translatable into a numerical relationship. And this numerical relationship is hearable in form of the appropriate ratio of oscillation of, for example, an instrumental string. If you have two stones, for instance, and the one stone weighs one pound and the other two, they have the numerical relationship of 2:1. You can transfer this relationship to a string instrument by picking a string and picking it again while you grip it exactly at its half. The whole oscillating string has double the length of the halved one (the numerical relationship of 2:1), and the sounding interval will be an octave. So, the proportion of 2:1 is measurable, thinkable, and hearable, and all three dimensions of proportions in their entirety are music. This principle is applicable inherently to all proportions and their hearable expressions: If you apply the proportion of 3:2 to an oscillating string, the interval of a perfect fifth will sound, and if you do the same with the proportion of 4:3, there will ring out a perfect fourth.

The striking aspect about this interplay of measuring, calculating, and sounding is the astonishing fact that you can take part of nothing less than God’s creative act itself. God, according to medieval fundamental conviction, has conceived his creation in absolute tidiness, and the medium of this order is proportion. The artistic system of the Middle Ages adapts here the platonic idea of the harmony of the spheres (particularly in his dialogues *Politeia* and *Timaios*) in a christian perspectivation (cf. Boethius, *De institutione musica*): All the planets are circumambulating earth in concentric circles, but with different gaps. The oscillation of the heavenly bodies in different frequencies are causing different tones which are

chiming in harmony. And due to the fact that the basis of this celestial harmony is simple ratio, you can find it also within the microcosmos of the earth, be it the body of men or the string of a lute.

This, first and foremost, is music in the Middle Ages. Obviously, this music is thinkable, it is visible and measurable, and it is sometimes hearable. But the question is, if this kind of music – God's order to creation, perceptible to the senses – also is music in the modern sense of the word. So, the real issue is actually not if medieval music is hearable but if the hearable medieval music is 'true music' in the meaning of an auditory medium of art and entertainment.

Well, just as a practising musician, I self-evidently have to give the answer: Yes, of course. It is just unthinkable from a practical point of view that there is any time in human history, where people won't sing and play music for their own joy and for the joy of others. The problem is that this kind of man-made, hearable music exists just for the duration of its performance. Nevertheless, we have enough evidence in the form of pictures, literary descriptions and instruments³ to say for sure that there is a lot of music in the modern sense of the word within the Middle Ages in the German language area, although the heritage of non-clerical musical scores starts comparatively late and hesitantly.⁴ We have to fundamentally distinguish the philosophical-theological '*ars*' of music from the practical '*usus*' of music. Its sociological setting is, first and foremost, the court, where is enough money, interest, and expert knowledge to employ practical musicians on a large scale.⁵

Hearable music, however, is always at risk of adulterating and destroying the actual, thinkable music: Badly built instruments, poor gut strings, change of temperature, mistreating (or rather just normal treating) of instruments leads regularly to unideal proportions by missing the perfect match just scantily. A perfect fifth, for example, with its 'beautiful' proportion of 3 to 2 will become a not so perfect fifth of the 'ugly' proportion of, let's say, 3012 to 1988, if you press the string just a little bit too hard. For the hearable music of the *usus*, this aberration is rather negligible, but for the thinkable music of the *ars*, it means a disastrous differentiation. And this problem is not only a matter of human or material inadequacy but is competing with the divine idea of creation. A codex of the 12.th century presents this differentiation of good thinkable music and bad hearable music tendentially as the opposite of sacred music and secular music:⁶ A two-part picture (in figure 1 below) shows on the top King David, playing his harp and surrounded by an organ and vocalists, showing a written music manuscript, whilst a theorist is playing both the monochord and cymbals. The downside of the picture shows a furry monster, playing a barrel-drum, surrounded by acrobatic dancers, a fiddler and a horn-player. The 'good' music on the top side has a holy setting (King David), a theoretical basis (monochord and

cymbals as the most important 'instruments' of the mathematical *ars musica*), a written tradition and sums up clerical instruments (organ, vocal); the 'bad' music on the down side has a diabolical setting (the monster), a practical-bodily basis (the performing dancers), an oral tradition (there is no manuscript, and perhaps one of the right dancers is doing solmisation with his hands) and sums up instruments and practices of entertainment music (fiddle, horn, drums, dancing). The courtly music of the medieval German language area is located in this field: semi-oral, bodily, sensual, entertaining, and way beyond artistic supervision.

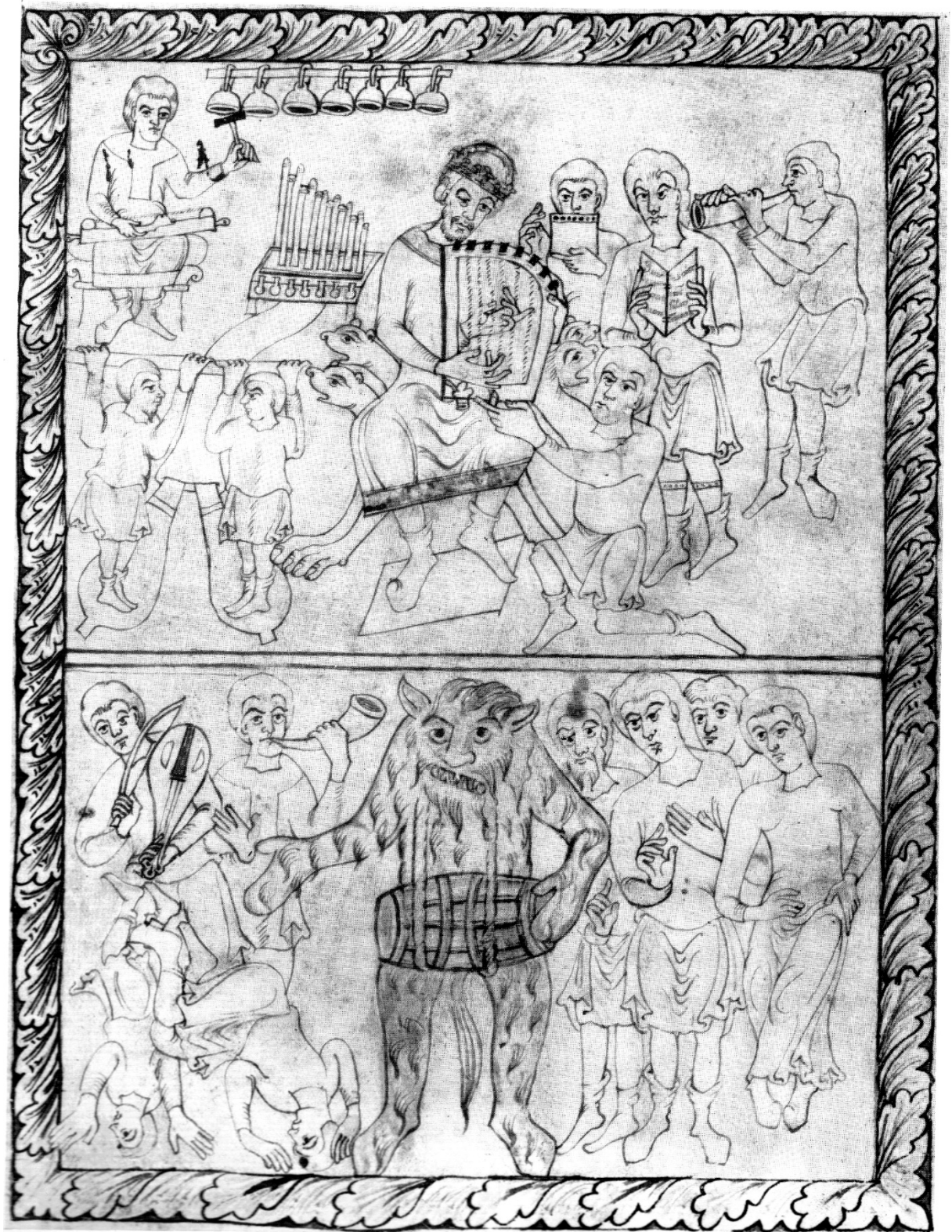


Figure 1: Illustration of *Good* and *Bad* Music

After all those contradicting differentiations, one could think that we are talking about two absolutely distinct phenomena, both called “music”. And the medieval thinking

with its pressure to scholastical categorisation fosters this impression. But the reality of music subverts this ideal-typical differentiation, because the theorists of the *ars musica* also had practical experience (and sensual indulgence) in music, and the practitioners of the *usus musica* often also had a theoretical education (plainest and most graspable in form of the goliards and traveling scholars)⁷.

Beyond all the efforts of the church to isolate the entertaining *usus* of non-sacred music⁸, we have to state that mediation is the very function of medieval music as a whole: Music communicates between its *ars* and *usus*, despite of the ideal typical segregation: What is thought within the *ars musica* becomes tangible – and communicable, verifiable, even tendentially criticisable – within the *usus*.⁹ Music also communicates between number and matter with its essentially item of proportion, as shown above. Therefore Music is in the Middle Ages the guarantor of the communication of those two scopes, which will be separated initially by Descartes with his fundamental and final differentiation of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. This state in-between coins the nature of the *ars musica* in particular, too: As Max Haas pointed out, the *ars musica* functions as an intense conjunction between the scholastic *trivium* and the *quadrivium*.¹⁰ Being the very medium of God's creation, music also communicates – or better to say: is the both thinkable and hearable communication – between macrocosm and microcosm. This idea becomes its most striking form with Boethius' tripartite of music in *musica mundana* (the order of creation regarding the cosmos), *musica humana* (the order of creation regarding men), and *musica instrumentalis*, which does not just mean instrumental music but the tangible representation of those perfect proportions, which are forming the order of creation.¹¹ Even regarding the opus-theory of Aristotle, seized by Robert Kilwardby in the 13th century, music has an interim state: As an *ars*, music bears no *opus* at all, being part of the *theoretica*; but practised, music gains an *opus* comparable to the poietic of the *artes mechanicae*.¹²

The concrete persons, first and foremost, who are functioning as (not only) musical mediators are the minstrels, representing (not only) music at the courts in the german language area:

As poet-singer-composer-musicians they created, adapted and performed literary, musical and theatrical entertainments. As travellers they were polyglots who served their patrons as reliable messengers and informants. Although branded as pariah, they were capable of functioning politically and artistically in the interstices of society.¹³

The medieval court as a meeting-space of very different discourses like philosophy, theology, politics, literature, and art is a perfect interdiscourse for the comprehensive mediation of the minstrels.

From this results, let's go back to our initial question: As already shown above, for the Middle Ages the relationship between thinkable and hearable music is the other way round regarding to modern times. Music is first and foremost thinkable, and its hearable existence is only a small part of it and, in addition to it, rather questionable. But especially the *usus* of music and its performers, the minstrels, fulfil multiple intermediary functions. Thus, this practical, courtly music would be a very interesting object of investigation for the fundamental question of this issue – but unfortunately there is an ineluctable obstacle: We don't have this part of medieval music any more. Having neither the opportunity nor the intention of recording sounding music, the Middle Ages are completely muted for our ears.

To be sure: One can hear "Medieval Music" not only at festivals for old music but also at every medieval market, in every historical movie or TV-series about the Middle Ages or the fictional worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis, in every appropriate computer game or LARP-play-session and all around the internet. But this "Medieval Music" is always just our more or less blind and tentative approximation to a sounding, which is never heard and lost forever. Certainly there are a lot of different methods of convergence, ranging from the academical study of medieval music manuscripts and reconstructing medieval instruments to following own dreams and visions of the "Dark Ages". But even the most 'authentic' method of reconstructing medieval music – the Historical Informed Practice, shortened HIP – has to state that we have nearly no sources informing us about the sounding of medieval music.¹⁴ This problem actually is unique for Medieval Music (regarding for example the HIP of Renaissance, Baroque, or Classical Music): Nearly all we know about Medieval Music for sure belongs to the reach of the *ars musica*, but our purpose as practical musicians is its *usus*, which is lost with its oral tradition.¹⁵ The result is a nasty gap in two different ways: The gap between *ars* and *usus* on the one hand and the gap between our times and the Middle Ages on the other.

But we are not alone with this nasty gap. As shown above, the medieval minstrel also had to deal with the gap between *ars* and *usus*, and often enough he or she had to interpret music which was made decades before: The "Middle Ages" with a period of 1000 years are not an epoch comparable to, for instance, the Viennese Classic with its roughly 50 years. A good example gives the heritage of the oeuvre from the so called Monk of Salzburg, who composed and wrote his songs in the time of archbishop Pilgrim II. of Puchheim, 1365-1396: The 'Lochamer-Liederbuch', written between 1451 and 1460 by practicing musicians, collects not only music of its

time but also songs by the Monk, written 70 to 100 years before;¹⁶ and the 'Mondsee-Wiener Liederhandschrift' from about 1455, containing the most songs by the Monk, includes instructions for the proper performance of the songs, indicating that the oral tradition of their interpretation is threatened to getting lost half a century later.¹⁷

So, despite all the differences there seems to be one fundamental experience which modern interpreters are sharing with their medieval counterparts: The dealing with this two-faced nasty gap. Like the medieval minstrel, the modern interpreter has to mediate between *ars* and *usus* on the one hand and between past and present on the other. Furthermore, he or she has to mediate between the own imagination and knowledge about the Middle Ages and those of his or her audience.¹⁸ This surely is a task not to solve – and the best demonstration hereof gives us the fundamental failing of the medieval music discussion itself: As shown above, the differentiation between *ars* and *usus* was an artificial one, irrespective of the many points of contact and intersections on a personal level. But, nevertheless, the whole medieval music theory didn't accomplish to think those two sides of one coin together. The first – and, properly speaking, only – try was made by a theorist named Johannes de Grocheio in the late 12th century. Johannes criticises the traditional systematisation of music coined by Boethius, Johannes de Garlandina and Gregor the Great: There is no harmony of the spheres, the microcosm of mens bodies doesn't sound, and it is inadequate for musicians to be concerned with the chant of the angels.¹⁹ After this breathtaking sweeping swipe, Johannes states that he wants to describe the music of his contemporaries in Paris and he differentiates vulgar music, mensural music, and church music.²⁰ This systematisation indeed draws on the *usus*, and from Johannes' perception that all three kinds of music are notated the same way there would be only a small step for a conflation of *ars* and *usus*. But Johannes' next steps are significant: He portrays the music in Paris not in a descriptive-inductive way but in a normative-deductive way, guided by Platons *Politeia*: The *cantus gestualis* (epic poems) for example would take the effect of preserving the state, and the *cantus coronatus* (some sort of courtly songs) would make the audience bold, brave, high-minded, and generous.²¹ In the end, Johannes remains – despite all the seemingly orientation on the *usus* – completely within the reach of the theoretical music-speculation. And Johannes' approach will not be imitated in the time following.

In the Middle Ages, the relationship between thinkable and hearable music is not to be debated theoretically but rather fathomed practically: spontaneous, multi-variant, just as if experimental. And, despite of all the assumable differences in detail, we have the opportunity to take part in this experience, when we try to reconstruct medieval music. Thus, mediation could be a fundamental method for the HIP: Being best possible informed about the descended part of medieval music (in other words:

the *ars musica*) and mediating it with the whole bunch of practical issues of music (in other words: the *usus*). Regarding medieval music, the question about the relationship between thinking and hearing music is a question which is not to be disputed mentally but rather is explored experimentally in form of aesthetic production. The question either is not answerable (which is mentally unsatisfying) or will be answered afresh by every single HIP-production (which is aesthetically satisfying). Hereby, the nasty gap can be transformed in lovely suspense.

Notes

¹ Regarding the vocal performance of Middle High German epics cf. Bertau, S. *Zum gesanglichen Vortrag mhd. strophischer Epik*. ZfdA 87/4 (1957), S. 253-270. Regarding the question of instrumental accompaniment of medieval songs cf. Lewon, M. *Zwischen Bordun, Fauxbourdon und Discantus. Zum Dilemma instrumentaler Begleitungsstrategien für mittelalterliche, weltliche Einstimmigkeit*. Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis 2018, pp. 87-118. My own strategy of accompaniment is exposed in Wagner, S. „Praktische Aufführung mittelalterlicher Proto-Volksmusik und hermeneutische Erkenntnis: Randständige Bemerkungen zu einer ‚volksmusikalischen‘ Annäherung an den Mönch von Salzburg“. In: Schichten – Strömungen – Spannungsfelder. Volksmusikalische Zeitfenster in Salzburg 1816-2016. Edited by W. Dreier-Andres, Salzburg 2020, pp. 51-82.

² Cf. Haas, M. *Musikalisches Denken im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung*. 2nd edition, Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 2; detailed pp. 53-76.

³ Regarding pictures cf. for example Smits van Waesberghe, J. *Musikerziehung. Lehre und Theorie der Musik im Mittelalter*. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1969. Regarding literary descriptions cf. for example Bartels, K. *Musik in deutschen Texten des Mittelalters*. Frankfurt am Main i.e.: Peter Lang, 1997; Eitschberger, A. *Musikinstrumente in höfischen Romanen des deutschen Mittelalters*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1999. Regarding instruments cf. for example Theune-Großkopf, B. *Das frühmittelalterliche ‚Sängergrab‘ von Trossingen*. Friedberg: Likias-Verlag. 2010.

⁴ Cf. Jammers, E. *Aufzeichnungsweisen der einstimmigen Außerliturgischen Musik des Mittelalters*. Köln: Arno Volk-Verlag, 1975.

⁵ Cf. Dobozy, M. *Re-Membering the Present. The Medieval German Poet-Ministrel in Cultural Context*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005.

⁶ Cambridge, St. John's College: Ms. B 18, fol. 1. The depiction is obtained from Smits van Waesberghe, J. *Musikerziehung. Lehre und Theorie der Musik im Mittelalter*. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1969, p. 53.

⁷ Cf. Schubert, E. *Fahrendes Volk im Mittelalter*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995, pp. 245-275. Also cf. Haas, M.: *Musikalisches Denken im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung*. 2nd edition, Bern i.a.: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 98f., 154f.

⁸ Cf. Dobozy, M. *Re-Membering the Present. The Medieval German Poet-Ministrel in Cultural Context*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005, pp. 33-84.

⁹ Cf. Haas, M.: *Musikalisches Denken im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung*. 2nd edition, Bern i.a.: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 73.

¹⁰ Cf. Haas, M.: *Musikalisches Denken im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung*. 2nd edition, Bern i.a.: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 69-73.

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- ¹¹ Cf. Haas, M.: *Musikalisches Denken im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung*. 2nd edition, Bern i.a.: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 91f.
- ¹² Cf. Haas, M.: *Musikalisches Denken im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung*. 2nd edition, Bern i.a.: Peter Lang, 2007, 132-137
- ¹³ Dobozy, M. *Re-Membering the Present. The Medieval German Poet-Ministrel in Cultural Context*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Bagby, B. „What is the Sound of Medieval Song?“ In: *Early music America* 14 (2008), pp. 44-50.
- ¹⁵ Regarding the oral tradition of medieval music cf. Lug, R: „Nichtschriftliche Musik“. In: *Schrift und Gedächtnis. Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation*. Edited by A. Assmann, J. Assmann, C. Hartmeier, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Petzsch, C *Das Lochamer-Liederbuch. Studien*. München: Beck Verlag, 1967.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Wagner, S. „Fruchtbares Scheitern. Die Interpretation mittelalterlicher Musik als praktische Hermeneutik“. In: *Der Mönch von Salzburg im Interpretationsprofil der Gegenwart*. Edited by T. Hochradner, S. Schmidt, Wien: Hollitzer, 2021, pp. 203-219.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Wagner, S. „Fruchtbares Scheitern. Die Interpretation mittelalterlicher Musik als praktische Hermeneutik“. In: *Der Mönch von Salzburg im Interpretationsprofil der Gegenwart*. Edited by T. Hochradner, S. Schmidt, Wien: Hollitzer, 2021, pp. 203-219.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Roloff, E (ed.) *Die Quellenhandschriften zum Musiktraktat des Johannes de Grocheio*. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1967, pp. 123f.
- ²⁰ Cf. Roloff, E (ed.) *Die Quellenhandschriften zum Musiktraktat des Johannes de Grocheio*. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1967, pp. 125.
- ²¹ Cf. Roloff, E (ed.) *Die Quellenhandschriften zum Musiktraktat des Johannes de Grocheio*. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1967, pp. 131.